

**SBJT: Do you think that a fallen Christian leader can ever be restored? If not, why not? But if so, under what conditions?**

**D. A. Carson:** This question has become increasingly pressing, owing in no small part to the number of Christian leaders who have fallen into publicly acknowledged sin, often (but certainly not always) of a sexual nature. Substantial books have been written on the subject; I am certainly not going to resolve all the difficulties in a thousand words or so. But perhaps I can set out what some of the crucial issues are, in four points.

(1) The question posed is sometimes ambiguous, or even tendentious. “Do you think that a Christian leader can ever be restored?” The first response must be: “Restored to what?” Suppose the sin is sexual. Does the restoration mean “restored to this family”? That will depend on the spouse, and what the spouse’s reaction will be turns on many factors. More commonly “restored” in the questioner’s mind really means “restored to the Lord.” The obvious answer is a joyous “Yes!”—for however grievous the

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sexual conduct, it is not in itself the unforgivable sin. But that does not necessarily mean that the Christian leader who has been restored to the Lord, and perhaps restored to church membership and participation at the Lord's Table (if we assume that he or she has been excommunicated) should also be restored to Christian leadership. Not every Christian in good standing in the church is qualified for every office in the church. So if someone has been removed from office for a biblically justifiable reason, the question about restoration *to that office* now turns on whether or not that person *now* meets the biblically mandated requirements of that office.

(2) Whether or not the person in question meets the biblically mandated requirements of that office now turns on two related matters. To give the discussion concrete form, let us suppose we are dealing with a former pastor who has been disciplined for adultery, but who has repented, put himself under the care of the elders (pastors) of the church, and has been restored to church membership (assuming he was removed). Now the question arises as to whether or not he can be restored to pastoral office. The two related matters to be explored are these: (a) Is he in danger of committing the sin again? This requires pastoral judgment as to the measure of the repentance, the degree of his spiritual restoration, the nature of the resolve and the accountability that he will display in the future. Let us be quite frank: the number of people (including pastors) who offend in this area *and then offend again* is extremely high. Quite apart from the moral obligation of the elders to protect the flock from a predatory pastor (and in this litigious society, that obligation has many dimensions to it!), there is an obligation to come

to consensus on whether or not the offender has been restored to the kind of moral resolve that makes recidivism unlikely. In biblical terms, the leaders must determine if the former pastor is now truly "self-controlled" (1 Tim 3:2), and someone who knows well how to manage his own family (1 Tim 3:4). For these are among the domains where his adultery has proved him unqualified to be an overseer, a pastor. (b) To what extent has his moral failure destroyed his credibility, both among the faithful and with outsiders?

(3) It is the second of these two questions that calls for further reflection. When the fallen pastor's supporters accuse the elders or the church of being unloving and unforgiving if they do not restore him to leadership, and loudly remind everyone that adultery is not the unforgivable sin, it is profoundly important to point out that such arguments are nothing more than red herrings. The real issue is public credibility. Paul insists that "the overseer must be above reproach" (1 Tim 3:2) and "must also have a good reputation with the outsiders" (1 Tim 3:7). The "above reproach" category does not demand sinless perfection. Rather, what is demanded is that the candidate have no moral flaw for which many people "reproach" him. Moreover, the fact that this pastor must have "a good reputation *with outsiders*" is surely worth thinking about. Sometimes a church is so sentimentally attached to its pastor that even when he falls into grievous sin, many in the church, perhaps even the majority, will be happy to let him remain in pastoral office, provided he shows adequate signs of repentance. But what about the outsiders? Do they look at his adultery, nod knowingly, and smirk? Is Christ's name

debased, not only because the pastor has committed adultery but also because the church has indicated it does not mind being led by a man who cannot keep his zipper up? Has this pastor so lost his credibility that when he preaches on anything to do with morality and integrity, a surfeit of polite sighs will escape from either the believers or the unbelievers or from both?

(4) In this light, then, the elders must ask tough questions not only about how this fallen pastor is doing in himself, but also about how his credibility has been affected, both with the church and outside. If they are satisfied with the pastor's improvement in the former domain, they must nevertheless ask the hard questions in the latter domain. At this juncture the prospect of the fallen pastor being restored to active pastoral leadership is nothing more than the question of how (or if) he can regain public credibility.

At this juncture I break with some hardliners, who insist that restoration to public office must be ruled out, precisely because this sort of public credibility is forever forfeit. I am not so sure. I am quite certain that the kind of three month, self-imposed withdrawal of Jimmy Swaggart, followed by his self-declared fitness for return to pastoral office, is a sad joke. In theory, however, I cannot see why a man could not regain credibility by starting over again, beginning at the bottom, proving faithful in small things. Perhaps he begins by cleaning the building, by parking cars for the elderly in the church lot, by attending the prayer meetings. Perhaps after some years his participation in a house group is of such humility and of such quality that he is occasionally asked to address the group. Perhaps with time he becomes a faithful deacon, and after

some years the integrity of his home life coupled with the depth of his biblical knowledge convince more and more people that he can be trusted with more. Perhaps he begins to preach once in a while. And so, over a long period of time, he may regain a great deal of public confidence, and be restored to some measure of spiritual leadership.

But this sort of path to restoration to pastoral office implicitly means two things. First, it is doubtful if this man will ever regain the authority he had before his fall. Too many people will know what has happened, and they will never be able entirely to forget it. Even if they agree that the man has regained substantial credibility, when he deals with certain themes they will inevitably remember his own egregious failure. And second, this model of restoration presupposes that the more prominent the pastor before the fall, the more unlikely is his full restoration to public trust after the fall. His very prominence means that more people will be devastated by this tumble, and more outsiders will make snide comments, ensuring that his restoration will take longer, be more difficult, and perhaps prove impossible.